

**Cook County Government**  
**Behavioral Health Services Quarterly Report**  
**Resolution #21-1189**



**Law Office of the Cook County Public Defender**  
**Behavioral Health Services Quarterly Report**  
**1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Quarter Report**  
**December 2025- May 2026**

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The following report is intended to provide the Cook County Board of Commissioners with the relevant information about services provided by the Law Office of the Cook County Public Defender in order to assess needs and improve quality and effectiveness of behavioral health care provided by Cook County government. This report focuses primarily on the mental health services provided by Client Support Services department within the Public Defender's office.

**General information on the population served, including how patients were identified or applied for services, a breakdown of where patients of the program(s) reside in Cook County and the number of patients served over the last 24-month cycle.**

The Law Office of the Cook County Public Defender provides legal representation to indigent residents of Cook County. The office has various divisions throughout Cook County including the Central Division (George N. Leighton Criminal Court Building), 1<sup>st</sup> Municipal District (City of Chicago), 2<sup>nd</sup> Municipal District (Skokie), 3<sup>rd</sup> Municipal District (Rolling Meadows), 4<sup>th</sup> Municipal District (Maywood), 5<sup>th</sup> Municipal District (Bridgeview), 6<sup>th</sup> Municipal District (Markham), Juvenile Justice, and Family Defense. The Public Defender provides representation to clients who are not able to afford to hire an attorney in matters ranging from misdemeanors, felony cases, traffic violations, domestic violence, juvenile delinquency, child protection to postconviction matters.

The Cook County Public Defender overwhelmingly serves minorities, especially African American men from Cook County's poorest areas.<sup>1</sup> While African Americans represent only a quarter of Cook County's population, they constitute 76% of the Cook County Department of Corrections (CCDOC) detainees and 74% of Chicago Police Department arrests.<sup>2,3</sup> More than half of CCDOC detainees are from majority black, impoverished communities on the South Side (one in three) and the West Side (one in five).<sup>4</sup> The clients represented by the Cook County Public Defender struggle with poverty, numerous barriers to services and care, and often times undiagnosed and untreated mental illness.

In attempts to address the needs of our clients and provide holistic representation, the Public Defender created the Mental Health Resource Unit (MHRU) in late 2019 and it became fully operational in October 2020. Previously, the office employed specialists dedicated to sentencing advocacy and specific casework in the Family Defense and Juvenile Justice divisions. In December 2024, the Public Defender formed an overarching Client Support Services department to provide dedicated support and resources to non-attorney specialists dedicated to human services; that is, mental health, mitigation, and casework.

Clients are referred to Mental Health Clinicians by attorneys or justice partners (e.g., CCHHS Cermak staff, Justice Advisory Council, judges, etc.) who identify a need. After being referred, clients are typically assessed to identify mental health concerns/needs and, collaboratively, the mental health team devises a plan to help improve our clients' quality of life and legal representation.

As of April 20, 2026, the department accepted 101 referrals specifically for mental health services within the first two quarters. In the last 24-month cycle, there have been 694 mental health referrals.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.cookcountysheriff.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/06/CCSO\\_BIU\\_CommunicationsCCDOC\\_v1\\_2021\\_06\\_30.pdf](https://www.cookcountysheriff.org/wpcontent/uploads/2021/06/CCSO_BIU_CommunicationsCCDOC_v1_2021_06_30.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ballesteros, Carlos. "Backlog Leaves 100s in Cook County Jail for More Than Year." Injustice Watch, April 21, 2021, accessed July 5, 2021, <https://www.injusticewatch.org/news/courts/2021/cook-county-jail-courtbacklog-coronavirus/> 2021.

<sup>3</sup> "Police Arrest Data," Chicago Police Department, accessed July 5, 2021. <https://home.chicagopolice.org/statistics-data/public-arrest-data/>

<sup>4</sup> Olson, D.E., Tahier, S. (2012). Population Dynamics and the Characteristics of Inmates in the Cook County. Chicago, Illinois, Cook County Sheriff's Reentry Council, accessed July 5, 2021, [https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=criminaljustice\\_facpubs](https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=criminaljustice_facpubs)

Below is a breakdown of the type of referrals received within the last two quarters for support from the mental health team.<sup>5</sup> Services will be explained in detail in subsequent sections.

- Number of linkage/placement referrals: 73\*
- Number of referrals for Psychosocial reports and treatment plan: 2
- Number of referrals for Psychological Evaluation: 3
- Number of mental health assessments: 20
- Number of Treatment Plan and supporting memorandum: 8
- Number of general/forensic case consultations: 12

\* Data includes out of custody linkage referrals addressed by Safer Foundation (contracted).

The Public Defender's Office also launched a pilot project in October 2024 targeting clients interviewed through our pretrial division. Clients' initial interviews are reviewed on a weekly basis to identify clients who reported a history of mental illness, substance abuse, and/or a need for treatment. Mental Health Clinicians are then assigned to make contact with the client, assess their service needs, and assist them with linkage to treatment. During the past two quarters, 247 individuals were identified as needing follow up and/or support from a mental health professional. Since the initiation of this project, a total of 1,196 individuals have been flagged for follow up.

In addition to providing services through Client Support Services, the Public Defender's Office currently represents 126 clients in the Mental Health Court program, which aims to reduce criminal activity, improve behavioral health, and promote public safety by addressing the disproportionate involvement and specialized needs of persons with mental health disorders in the criminal justice system.<sup>6</sup>

### **Overall goals of behavioral health program(s) including goals unique to the specific population served.**

The Mental Health Clinicians are dedicated to supporting the Law Office's mission towards providing a holistic defense by identifying and addressing clients' mental health needs that impact their legal cases and ultimate outcome. The overall goal is to accurately assess clients' mental health needs and diagnostic presentations in order to provide recommendations/consultation on how to best address the clients' needs and provide them with representation. Staff develop intervention plans based on the client's needs and link them directly to services utilizing a warm handoff approach. Furthermore, mental health staff seeks to provide education on psychiatric and related issues to attorneys and the courts to ensure that clients are receiving quality representation and that statutory requirements are being met.

### **Information on the providers, managers, and/or operators of the behavioral health care program, activity or service and any overlap in funding, to the extent it is known.**

The Mental Health Clinicians are under the supervision of Dr. Brittany Wells, Licensed Clinical Psychologist. Dr. Wells is responsible for developing and implementing the services provisions for the Client Support Services department, managing all administrative duties, and providing direct and indirect supervision to Client Support Services staff. She also provides consultation on forensic

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<sup>5</sup> The statistics provided do not equate to the total number of new referrals as referrals can include multiple services/work products.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cookcountycourt.org/division/problem-solving-courts/mental-health-treatment-court-program>.

psychological matters and conducts psychological evaluations. The staff dedicated to addressing clients' mental health needs includes the following Mental Health Clinicians: Laura Lord, Licensed Clinical Social Worker; Peter McInerney, Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Certified Alcohol and Drug Counselor; and Jada Williams, Licensed Social Worker. The Mental Health Clinicians are responsible for conducting mental health screenings and needs assessments. They devise treatment plans and psychosocial reports for mitigation purposes and provide direct linkage to services.

In addition, Client Support Services consists of ten (10) mitigation specialists, three (3) caseworkers dedicated to family court, one (1) caseworker who works with juvenile clients, and a caseworker supervisor who is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, and a mitigation supervisor who is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. All of these professionals service and/or assist with the representation of clients who present with mental health concerns.

**Key performance indicators measuring the results of the program.**

Success of the Client Support Services' Mental Health Team (CSS Mental Health Team) would be indicated by the number of clients served across the various divisions of the office and the number of favorable outcomes in clients' legal cases as well as in the establishment of services in the community. Additional information gathered includes the type of services requested/provided and case outcomes in comparison to maximum sentence.

**Quality measures or expectations for contracts involved in the program, where applicable.**

There are currently no contracts involved in the operation of this department.

**Information on how the care being provided in this program serves the best interests of the patient/recipient of care as well as the communities where the patient/recipient of care or services resides.**

The services provided by the CSS Mental Health Team serves the best interests of our clients by assessing their unique needs and providing tailored recommendations that adequately address those needs and assist counsel in their representation. The CSS Mental Health Team are not treatment providers and therefore do not provide clients with the identified care that they need. However, following assessment, we provide direct linkage to treatment providers and other social services. We work closely with providers within the legal system and the community to achieve this goal.

The CSS Mental Health Team is uniquely positioned to provide support to our clients while they are incarcerated and within the community. Using a wrap-around approach, we provide ongoing support to our clients as they reintegrate into the community and get established with service providers. Our goal is to help our clients to overcome various psychosocial barriers to successful reentry and reduce the likelihood of recidivism, which benefits clients and the community alike.

The CSS Mental Health Team also provides services (e.g., Psychosocial Evaluations, Psychological Evaluations, and Treatment Plans) to help mitigate sentences, thus ensuring that our clients receive quality representation and get the best possible legal outcome. Additionally, the CSS Mental Health Team provides consultation to assist attorneys in addressing clients' psychiatric issues when they rise to

a level of interfering with their legal case (i.e., fitness to stand trial, NGRI, fitness to waive Miranda rights, etc.). This helps to ensure that our clients are represented in a fair and ethical manner.

**Information on how the continuum of care may be addressed through this program.**

The CSS Mental Health Team provides linkage to clients who are referred to the unit and in need of care. We work with clients while they are incarcerated and maintain contact with them should they be released to the community. We are able to support clients' continuity of care by following up with them in the community and identifying barriers to their care. If there are barriers to care, the CSS Mental Health Team will work with the client to identify providers and other resources needed (e.g., shelter, medical coverage, etc.) to ensure they receive continued treatment.

**Information on the best practices in this type of programming.**

In developing the mental health services provided by the Public Defender's Office, research was conducted on best practices for running a specialized mental health program within a public defender office. There are several Public Defender offices across the nation who also strive to provide holistic defense by including mental health or similar units such as Harris County, Knox County, Los Angeles County, Miami-Dade County, San Francisco County, Travis County, and The Public Defender Service for DC.

In addition to identifying best practices established through other public defender offices, the CSS Mental Health Team standards of practice related to assessment/evaluations, record keeping, and social work are consistent with industry standards, ethical guidelines, and bylaws outlined by state regulatory boards. Our practice emphasizes client-centered, trauma-informed approaches that focus on each client's individual needs.

**Information detailing meetings and coordination on patient identification, programs and goals with other Cook County agencies, City of Chicago or other partners or entities on this program, where applicable.**

The CSS Mental Health Team conducts weekly staff meetings to discuss individual cases and review case assignments. The team also meets bi-weekly for Case Conferences in which staff members focus on one case and share ideas related to diagnostics, methods of assessment, and recommendations. The CSS Mental Health Team relies on peer consultation to ensure that our clients' needs are accurately identified and adequately addressed.

The CSS Mental Health Team does not currently have any formal partnerships with other Cook County agencies. However, we work collaboratively and have frequent communication with the Cook County Health and Hospital Systems (CCHHS) Cermak staff to execute linkage/placement plans developed by the mental health staff. We also refer any clients to them who need immediate assessment, psychiatric evaluation, or mental health follow-up while in the Cook County Department of Corrections (CCDOC). The Client Support Services administrator meets monthly with administrators from CCHHS and Cook County Sheriff's Office (CCSO) to identify opportunities for collaboration, advocate for client needs, and develop policies/procedures to eliminate barriers imposed on our clients. The CSS Mental Health Team has also worked closely with the Justice Advisory Council (JAC) in the past.

The CSS Mental Health Team frequently hosts presentations from community providers to increase staff's knowledge and service utilization. We have also supported various initiatives by Cook County entities such as the Frequently Impacted Strategy project with the Safety and Justice Challenge in the past. We hope to continue fostering working relationships with other Cook County agencies to help serve our clients.

**An evaluation of the program and an overview of any overlap in outreach, communities served, and programs with other Cook County and City of Chicago Agencies, and an evaluation of the impact of the program and an overview of its effectiveness, particularly as it pertains to vulnerable populations, racial and ethnic minorities; and populations facing disparities in behavioral health outcomes, behavioral health care, and behavioral healthcare access.**

The Law Office of the Cook County Public Defender serves the county's indigent population that is involved with the criminal justice system. Our clientele is predominantly minorities and individuals facing a number of psychosocial stressors (e.g., racism/discrimination, barriers to care, unemployment, housing instability, etc.). By employing mental health staff, the Public Defender's Office is able to adequately identify clients' psychiatric and social service needs and have become an integral part of devising and executing plans to address those needs. We are not only representing and assisting the clients, but we are able to provide them with the support needed to reduce the likelihood of reoffending.

We have seen success not only in linking and appropriately placing clients, but in favorable case outcomes due to the involvement of a mental health professional. There is some overlap in efforts with other Cook County agencies, CCHHS Cermak for example. However, we make every effort to work collaboratively with them and are mindful of their roles and obligations. The CSS Mental Health Team are a part of our clients' defense teams, and we differ from other behavioral health programs within Cook County because we are directly involved in our clients' legal cases and are invested in their case outcome. We advocate for our clients from that perspective, and focus on their mental health, social, and legal needs.

**Information with the costs associated with the program(s) and funding source(s).**

The operation of this department is covered by the Law Office of the Cook County Public Defender's budget.

**Any additional information which may facilitate the Committee's understanding of the program, initiative, or activity.**

In addition to the services/mission described above, it is important to note that the CSS Mental Health Team is an internal resource that supports attorneys in litigating cases for clients who have significant psychiatric issues. Below are examples of some of the consultative, clinical, and case management services provided by this department:

- Consultation is provided when clients present with significant psychiatric issues and require a forensic psychological evaluation (i.e., fitness to stand trial, NGRI, fitness to waive Miranda rights). Consultation includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Conducting brief clinical assessments to help identify and expedite appropriate forensic psychological cases.
  - Reviewing forensic psychological evaluations, test data, and testimony to help defense prepare for cross examination.
  - Identifying the need for contracting expert witnesses, assist in identifying the type of witness most suited for the case, and recommend potential experts.
  - Reviewing records and assist attorneys in understanding diagnoses, medication, and treatment history as it relates to the client's functioning.
  - Providing attorneys with research on best practices and other treatise to support cross examination when applicable.
  - Providing education on various assessment tools commonly used in forensic psychological evaluations.
- Clinical services include the following:
    - Conducting Mental Health Screenings and evaluations to identify client's psychiatric history, symptom presentation, and current mental status/functioning to provide recommendations on appropriate treatment interventions to effectively meet clients' needs and reduce the likelihood of recidivism. Screenings and evaluations are also used to provide recommendations to attorneys on potential legal action or sentencing alternatives.
    - Completing Psychosocial Evaluations and written reports to outline significant mental health, substance abuse, and trauma histories to support mitigation. Reports include information related to evidence-based practices, current research, and applicable tools such as ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire) when appropriate.
    - Completing thorough Treatment Plans with treatment goals, objectives, proposed treatment providers, and information related to prognosis.
    - Conducting Psychological Evaluations to support mitigation and address pretrial or sentencing issues.
- Case Management services include, but is not limited to, the following:
    - Assessing clients' social service needs.
    - Providing direct linkage to mental health and social services within the community to address client's needs and help mitigate, reduce, or divert sentences. Staff utilizes a warm hand-off approach to increase the likelihood of success within the community.
    - Assisting clients with linkage to placement/housing when in need.
    - Monitoring clients' progress once linked to services to ensure adequacy of services provided.
    - Linking clients to job placement and other specialized programs (e.g., literacy programs, skills training, etc.) when possible.
    - Assisting clients with registration for Medicaid so that they can receive needed services.
    - Assisting attorneys by assessing clients' presentation and providing them with education and tools to improve their communication and the attorney-client relationship.

**Any additional information which may foster a more accurate assessment of behavioral health care needs and opportunities for collaboration or growth within the Cook County Government entity's behavioral health care programs.**

There is no additional information at this time.